

Bowhead whale entangled in commercial crab pot gear recovered near Saint Lawrence Island, Bering Strait

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Synopsis: Savoonga Whaling Captains Association (SWCA), University of Alaska-Marine Advisory Program (UAF-MAP), and the North Slope Borough, Department of Wildlife Management (NSB-DWM) worked together to document a floating bowhead whale found dead and entangled in nylon line and floats during July 2015, near Saint Lawrence Island, in the Bering Strait region.

Dead whale

A dead floating bowhead (2015-FD2) was encountered July 7th, 2015 approximately 15-20 miles east of Savoonga on the north shore of Saint Lawrence Island by a small boat traveling from summer camp (Figure 1). The dead whale was estimated to be 15-18 m (50-60 ft.) in length and initial observers reported this whale as female. The sea state at that time was too choppy for further investigation.

SWCA members returned to 2015-FD2 July 8 to salvage skin/blubber for human consumption. Three boats attempted to tow the large carcass to shore but were unable to land the whale. The observers noted two floats located under the fluke and lines wrapped around the peduncle region of the whale. The gear attached to 2015-FD2 was not recovered.

On July 9 SWCA members returned to 2015-FD2 and recovered all available gear for documentation. Of note, there was no pot or pot fragments seen or attached to any line during the gear recovery. On July 10 SWCA shipped a burlap bag containing an inflatable vinyl float and a cardboard box containing an inflatable vinyl float, lines, permit tag, and a small skin sample (approx. 300 gm) to Nome.

During July 11 the gear recovered from 2015-FD2 was unpackaged in the UAF-Northwest Campus Science Lab where it was measured, photographed, and documented by UAF-MAP.

The following data are from the commercial fishery gear recovered from 2015-FD2 (Figure 2).

Lines

Three colored lines between $\frac{3}{4}$ " – $\frac{7}{8}$ " diameter were measured as is, no knots were untied and all lines were left in the same condition/configuration as initially found (Figure 2).

Measurements of recovered gear include:

- White line: (7/8" diameter) Length from knot at base of Float 1 to multi-line junction, 125 cm. Length from multi-line junction to knot joining light green line, 100 cm. Total white line: 2.25 m (approx. 8 ft.)
- Light Green line: (7/8" diameter) Length from knot joining to white line to multi-line junction, 315 cm. Length from multi-line junction to end of the light green line, 23.35 m: Total light green line: 26.50 m (approx. 86 ft.)
- Yellow line: (3/4" diameter) Length from the end that was cut during the initial response (releasing Float 2) to hitch/loop attached on white line: 11.90 m (approx. 39 ft.)
- Minimum total length of line retrieved that had been attached to the peduncle region of the bowhead: 40.65 m (approx. 133 ft.)

Of note, there was a small white plastic buoy "slipper" ring encircling the white line at the multi-line junction area.

Floats

Two inflatable vinyl floats were recovered (Figure 3). During the initial removal of gear from the whale, both floats were located under the fluke. Both floats were marked with the same State of Alaska Registration number "11022". The ADF&G Commercial Fisheries Division reported this as the registration number for the Fishing Vessel SAGA.

During the removal of gear from the whale, Float 1 was found to be full of water and was cut open to facilitate removal and safe handling. During the initial gear recovery, Float 2 was removed from the yellow line by cutting it off at the base of the knot which attached Float 2 to the yellow line. A large "S" circled with a dark blue colored band was prominently marked on the top of Float 2.

Permit tag:

A large (approx. 11x12 cm) magenta-colored vinyl tag was attached to the white line just below Float 1 with a black plastic cable "zip tie" (Figure 4). It was marked on one side with "ADF&G Series A 242 131 BSAI". This unique color-coded permit tag was issued by ADF&G Commercial Fisheries Division at Dutch Harbor for the (Series A) Bering Sea Aleutian Islands limited entry 2012 commercial blue king crab fishery season. During 2012, this fishery season ran from October 15, 2012 - February 1, 2013. Though data on the original ADF&G registration form for this tag was incomplete, this tag series was issued for Saint Matthew Island waters during the 2012/2013 commercial season.

Current Status

- The carcass of 2015-FD2 came ashore July 13th (Figure 5) and though there was no photo of the peduncle region on this date, an observer reported that at the peduncle region "where the ropes had been, her tendons were showing".

- All gear recovered from 2015-FD2 will be provided to the NSB-DWM for archive.
- The skin sample will be sent to the NSB-DWM for genetic analysis.
- Based on all observations and the level of detail provided by the recovered equipment, bowhead whale 2015-FD2 had been entangled in commercial crab fishery gear prior to death.

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Figure 1. Adult bowhead whale (2015FD2) entangled in commercial pot gear found floating dead July 2015 approximately 20 miles east of Savoonga, Saint Lawrence Island. Photo: Savoonga Whaling Captains Association.

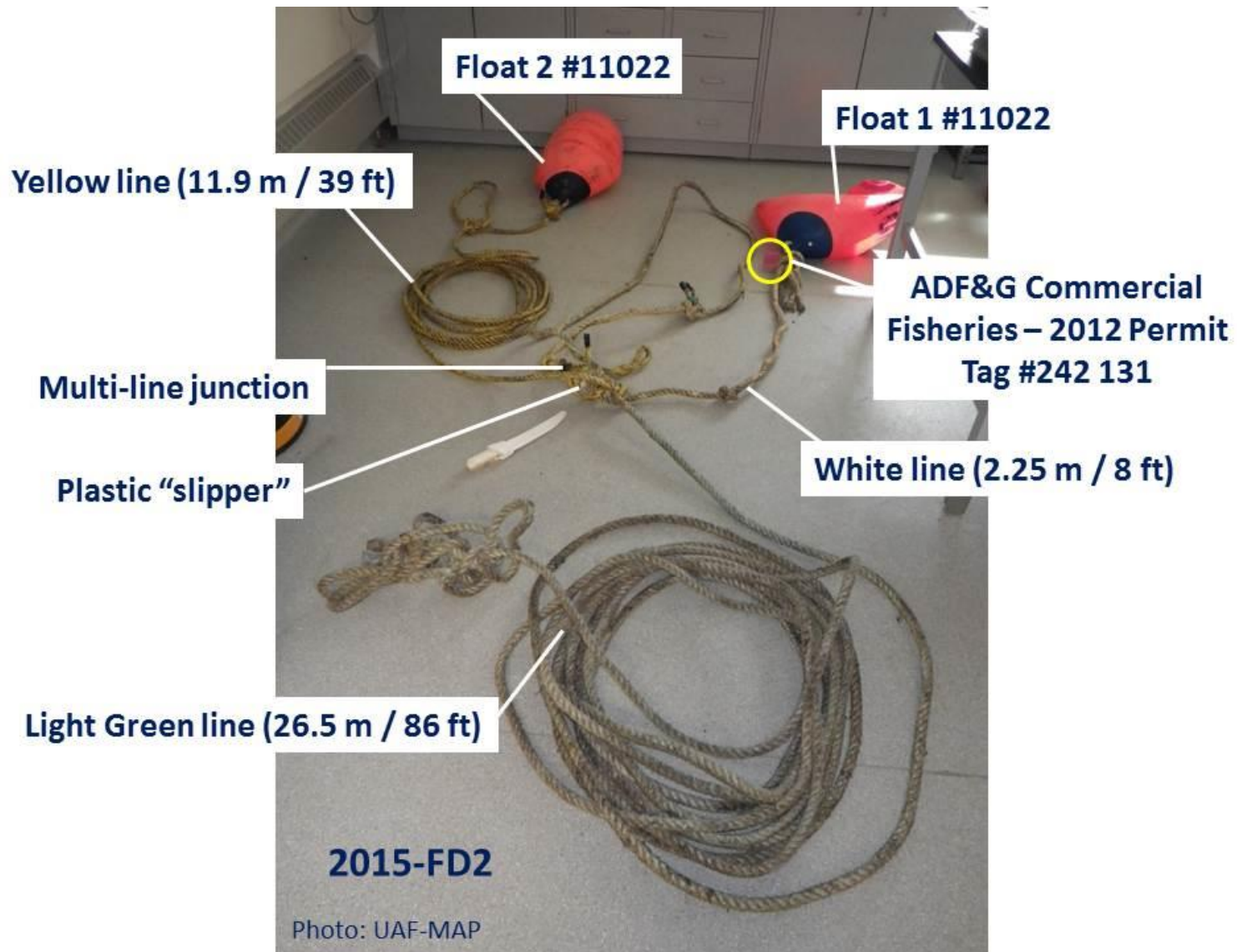


Figure 2. Commercial crab fishery gear recovered from the peduncle region of a dead floating bowhead (2015-FD2) found near Saint Lawrence Island during July 2015. Photo: UAF-MAP

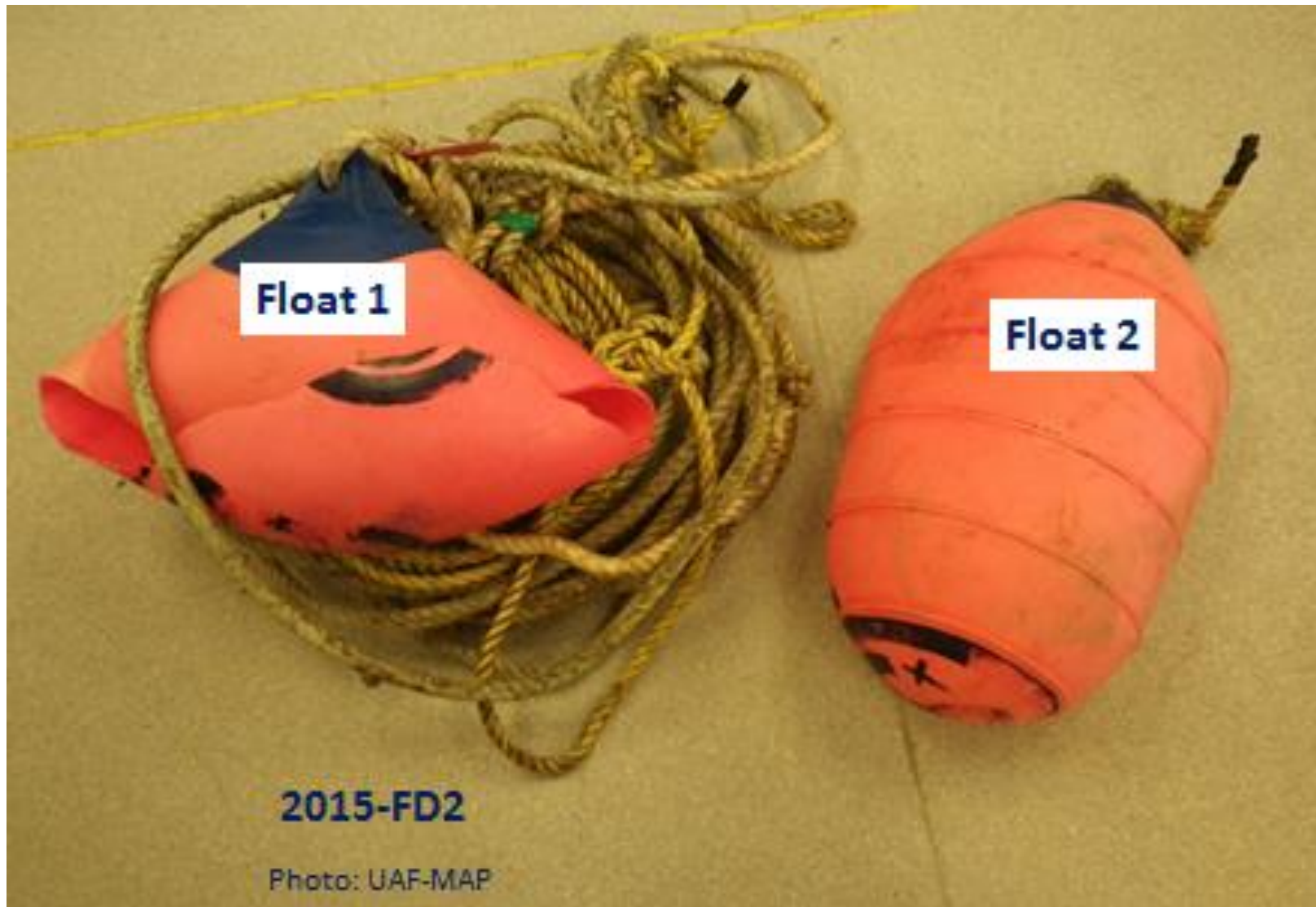


Figure 3. Two inflatable vinyl floats were recovered. Float 1 was cut open during the initial gear recovery. Both floats were marked with the Registration number "11022". Photo: UAF-MAP



Figure 4. ADF&G Series A Bering Sea Aleutian Island Limited Entry Pot Permit Tag attached to recovered gear. Photo: Savoonga Whaling Captains Association



Figure 5. Bowhead whale carcass (2015-FD2) landed July 13, 2015 on beach east of Savoonga, Saint Lawrence Island.
Photo: Savoonga Whaling Captains Association